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THE TUTORIAL SYSTEM IN COLLEGE¹

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The large college has had the advantage over the small college of more opportunities and a greater cosmopolitanism. The small college has had the following advantages over the larger college: greater accessibility of the opportunities to the student, more definite and concentrated work, and a closer personal touch with his professor. These inestimable advantages the larger colleges and universities have been losing, and the great aggregate of students who flock to the larger centers of learning have been becoming less and less an organized army and more and more a mere herd. Whatever be the experience of other places, I have no hesitation in saying that the experience of Princeton University was that with the rapid student growth there came to be less and less attention given to the individual student's needs and more and more dispersion of the individual students in the masses of their fellows; so that whatever the good of the cosmopolitan college fellowship, and whatever good the student might chance to get from the larger opportunities, he was losing something priceless, namely, definiteness in his work and that close personal touch of the student with the master without which the best education cannot be obtained and never is obtained all the way from the child at the mother's knee to the highest graduate student in the most advanced subject. Pardon me if I speak with some conviction on this, for I believe it fully.

And to speak as briefly and plainly as I can of an experiment we are now making in order to recover what we believe to have been the priceless

¹ Read before the New England Association of Colleges and Preparatory Schools, October, 1906.

advantage of the small college and combine it with the cosmopolitanism, the manifold opportunity, of the larger university, it was natural, when we thought over that question, to look back to the beginnings of the American colleges, and to ask from what root we had sprung. And as we looked back and read the history of the oldest collegiate foundations, we soon discovered that one of them started with a president and two tutors and another with a president and one tutor, and another with a president who was president, faculty, and tutor all in one. But somehow that little relic of ancestral English education had been lost sight of, and we wondered whether, by turning our eyes again to the English universities, from which, after all, the American college system has sprung, we might not discover there some helpful information. Naturally we turned, to make a long story short, to the Oxford tutorial system.

It is not easy to understand Oxford, any more than it is to understand England. Oxford is not a logical, but a historical, expression. It is full of inconsistent coexistences of old and new, of lingering, apparently obsolescent modes of behavior and thinking, side by side with the newest things of modern life. You look at an Oxford building. There will be an old piece of the fourteenth or fifteenth century, somehow planted with the newer eighteenth-century work—old and new together, perhaps incongruous at first sight, and yet all blended and mellowed by the ivies and vines and softened by the effect of the climate. Such, also, is the history of Oxford in things intellectual. Originally a mass of Latin statutes governed the university, replaced in part by later statutes in English, some of them left with the old Latin titles, some all Latin, some all English, some all English, but with the ancient headline left, from reverence or forgetfulness. So, if you go to the course of study, you find still lingering mediæval terms—the word “commencement,” which we have taken, the word “responsions,” and so you might go on to the end of the list—side by side with the newest things. And you find a surging conflict of opinion, often ending in compromise, sometimes ending in the retreat of knowledge, at other times ending in the advance of knowledge. And so the tides of Oxford life have been flowing back and forth, and yet on the whole there is an irregularly increasing intellectual gain.

Now, if it is not too much out of the way, I should like to stop an instant just to say what was the matter with Oxford, and how the tutorial system remedied that trouble. The dark age of Oxford was the eighteenth century. Read the pages of Gibbon, Swift, and Adam Smith. Anyone may look there and see how knowledge seemed to have vanished. It was a place of sinecures, of “licensed idleness,” of indifference, of intellectual

and moral decline. And yet it was the very time when Cambridge was at its brightest intellectual eminence. At the opening of the nineteenth century it occurred to one man—a real man—Evesleigh of Oriel College, that something was the matter, and the matter was that there was no guarantee of distinction to a student who did well in his examinations and no mark of reproach on him if he did ill, and, most charmingly absurd of all, there was no security against collusion between the students and the examiners. It occurred to him that the first thing to do was to reform the system of examinations, and thus straighten out the course of study somewhat. He made the attempt, and was successful in introducing a reformation of abuses that had existed. Soon there sprung up in a limited but brilliant way an intellectual revival in Oriel College, but it did not sweep the university. It was one thing to reform examinations; it was another thing to reform professors and students. It was one thing to lead the horse to the water; it was another thing to make him drink. And yet the first step in the right direction had been taken by abolishing evils connected with the system of examining and the course of study. It remained for Parliament fifty years later to make a searching investigation into the condition of the ancient university, to go into the reform of the professorate and of the Fellows, to redistribute the funds, to abolish sinecures, and to complete what Evesleigh at the beginning of the century had begun.

But still only the first part of the reform was accomplished—the better organization of the teaching staff, the course of study, and the system of examinations. What difference did it make to a pleasantly idle student what these things were, provided he was not interested? Finally—I cannot place the date of this, but give the tale as I remember it—it occurred to one man—again a real man—a young don of Balliol College, that there was no education in the best sense without the one-to-one contact, man to man, face to face. Somewhere in there, in the literal handing-on of the torch of knowledge from teacher to student, lay the secret. And so Mr. Jowett voluntarily took a few students one by one to meet him once a week and talk over their individual difficulties. He found that such and such a man was weak in his Greek syntax. He would set him a page or two of something to read, or to write him a little paper about it a week after. Another perhaps was weak in his logic, or some part of his logic. Another could not write his Latin well. Another was deficient elsewhere. He talked over the difficulties with each one separately, and made them bring him—or, rather, they were willing to bring him—each week some little attempt of their own to overcome their particular difficulties; and

this attempt he would criticize, and thus help to set them right. To make a long story short, it was soon evident that students taught in that way were surpassing other students of like natural ability, and after a brief delay—brief for Oxford—Balliol College adopted a tutorial system, and Jowett, the famous editor of *Plato*, became the Master of Balliol. Balliol men began sweeping the honors of the university, and to be a Balliol man was to have the blue ribbon of intellectual distinction.

The next stage was naturally that all the other colleges of Oxford, in varying modes, adopted a tutorial plan. Although the principle on which that tutorial system is founded is as old as human nature, and is commonly supposed to be a system of teaching which has existed for centuries in the University of Oxford, it is in fact about the newest thing ancient Oxford has, the most modern thing in it as a well-tested actual piece of educational machinery.

We considered the Oxford experience carefully, and wondered what could be done in an American university to produce similar results in undergraduate students. Perhaps unconsciously, perhaps in part consciously, we began repeating rapidly to a large extent the experience of the University of Oxford. First of all we proceeded to reform our own course of study. I shall not go into that subject at length. Courses of study, schedules of study, are perhaps as dry as the tariff bill or an almanac, and yet they have important uses. We have, however, come—and I will state this without debating or arguing it—to the following position: that in organizing your scheme of liberal education the four-year college course is to be retained at all hazards; secondly, that the earlier part of the course should consist mainly of prescribed studies of fundamental and general nature; thirdly, that the latter part of the course should consist of studies of which a majority lie in some large department of the student's own choice, the remaining courses being free; in other words, a system of gradual and progressive election based on a prescribed substratum. And in doing so we organized these studies under three degrees: first, the historical bachelor of arts degree, retained in its traditional significance as including a prescribed training in mathematics and science, the classical literatures, modern literature, and philosophy. Then two modern bachelor's degrees—one the degree of bachelor of science, a specifically modern liberal degree for those whose main studies lie in the scientific direction, and the other the bachelor of letters, a specifically modern degree for those whose studies lie mainly in the humanistic direction. In that way we believe we accommodate nearly all persons who may properly ask to

receive a bachelor's degree of any kind in liberal studies at the close of a four-year college course.

Then the question at once arose: How shall we not only bring the course of study to the student, but do the second thing, bring the student to the course of study? Let me speak on that as my principal theme tonight. The first thing to be done was to find the means necessary to secure the proper men to do that highly important work. President Woodrow Wilson at once appealed to the alumni of the university to give two and a half million dollars, not for bricks and mortar, not for stained-glass windows and chimes and gateways and cages and baseball fields, and all that sort of thing, which so many consider the essence of a modern university, but for the men who were to help in this teaching. He appointed a committee of fifty graduates, with a very capable chairman, Mr. Cleveland Dodge, of New York, to prosecute this canvass over the whole country. In a brief time we received subscriptions sufficient to pay the entire expense of the experiment for five years, and a part, though less than the major part, of the endowment necessary to sustain the work in perpetuity. That canvass is still going on. I want to say that the very first effect of this, the most immediately and obviously beneficial effect, was on our own alumni. They responded quickly and splendidly to President Wilson's insistent assertion that the invisible things were greater than the visible. And so they have been willingly giving their money to help on this intimate education of our students.

The next thing, after we were safe enough to go ahead, was to select the men who were to do this work. First of all we resolved that, if the thing was to succeed at all, every member of the faculty already in the faculty who was qualified should take part in it, from the highest to the lowest officer of the staff of instruction, and that we should add to them men who would have the rank of assistant professors, but the function of this close individual teaching. In doing so we spent a great deal of time, had a great deal of travel done and a great deal of conference held in the departments, and then searched the country. We were able to pay only a moderate salary for this service, valuable as it is—say \$1,500 to \$2,000. That naturally cut us off from men who were good scholars, but had incumbent on them the support of a family. I must say that seemed a pity. It seemed like encouraging celibacy again, and that is, of course, a terrible thing to do. But there we were. Again, it brought us face to face with this fact, that naturally the preceptors we should choose would be younger men as a rule, men say from twenty-eight to thirty-five years

of age—that has been about the run of it; men, however, who had had thorough education, who had shown real scholarship, who had also shown that they were accessible, engaging, interesting men, who naturally loved students. I may say that in the department of which I am a member we considered seventy-four names, out of which ten were chosen. We are fully conscious that some of these who were not chosen were not chosen solely because they had been guilty of the atrocious crime of being married, but that was their fault and not ours. Still, leaving that out of account, we made a thorough search, and as a result last year—and, if I may, let me add in the figures for this year—we have added over fifty men to the instructional force.

Now, how did we go to work in apportioning their labor, and what sort of labor is it? In the first place, let me say negatively a few things. Our preceptorial plan is not class instruction in very small divisions, excellent thing as that is. In the next place, it is not “coaching” or tutoring individual students or small groups of students to pass examinations. What is it? Let us go back a minute and consider a college class. Take any class you like—freshmen, sophomores, juniors, or seniors. Assume any number you please. Suppose we take a freshman class, say three hundred men. Let us assume they are being taught in twelve sections or divisions of twenty-five students in the classroom, which is about our practice in the freshman year. What then? How does the preceptorial work touch them?

I may say incidentally that it was clear immediately we could not do one thing—a thing, by the way, that seems to me a great advantage in the Oxford plan. We could not find preceptors or tutors who could take any given student in all his studies. Of course, you realize that this is done in Oxford. The students of the University of Oxford divide into two sets—the Passmen, those who are striving simply to get through, and the Classmen, those who are striving for honors. The Passman has a very limited range of subjects. In Oxford the student who will not work is given very little freedom—an idea which does seem to me well worthy of imitation here. Freedom is for the man who will work. The Classman is the man who will work. Very good. Your Passman enters Oxford, has his classics, his mathematics, his elements of natural philosophy and logic, and so on—practically a very limited range to begin with. Their system of education trains men who can supervise that restricted range of studies. So could our men, if that had been our mode of training. But it has not been. It would take some time to get it established, if it were necessary to establish it.

The Classman in Oxford concentrates his work in some one important field, such as modern history, *literae humaniores*, or natural science, and he has one person to guide him in that field. That is the way they provide for the Classmen.

Now, we solved our problem in the following way: Our freshmen and sophomores are to have, and do have, one hour a week with the preceptor in each leading subject. For example, freshmen who are candidates for the degree of A.B. have one hour a week preceptorially in Latin, one in Greek, one in mathematics, one in a modern language, one in English. Our freshman candidate for the degree of bachelor of science will have one preceptorial hour a week in his Latin, one in his French, one in his German, one in his mathematics, and one in his physics, and one in his English. Although it is not rigorously true—it is not quite true of freshmen—let us assume what is the fact now generally throughout the course of study that we have the fifteen-hour schedule, composed of five three-hour courses. We take one hour off the classroom instruction and give it to preceptorial work, so that in a three-hour course there will be two hours in the classroom and one hour with the preceptor.

Now let us see how the preceptorial hour works in a particular course and in the freshman year, though the unit there happens to be four hours in some subjects and two in others. How do we do it? It is mechanically practicable to take a class division of twenty-five men in any course and schedule them—say on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday—three hours. The first and second of these hours go to class instruction, the third hour to preceptorial work. But how? In the following way: Take that division of twenty-five, break it into six little clumps of say four students each, and put six preceptors simultaneously at work during that third hour. That is an obvious, simple, mechanical device, but one which is to us of the greatest service. We can of course get any class division of twenty-five fairly homogeneous. We then divide the division into six groups, which will average four men apiece; and that is on the whole the prevailing unit in our preceptorial unit—groups of four men. We did not quite get to “blocks of five.” We should be pleased to have groups of three, if we could have enough preceptors to attend to them, or even two, or one; but we have not.

Now, it is evident that in any well-regulated time-table you can divide three hundred students in any subject into twelve homogeneous divisions of twenty-five, provided you arrange things so that each leading subject divides independently of the others, and solely according to the merits of the men in that subject. Your first or highest division will thus contain

the very finest students. Your second division will be, on the whole, the next finest set. And as you go on down your list of divisions you soon begin to get to high mediocrity, then dull mediocrity, deadly mediocrity, hopeless inferiority, and at last the abyss. At the top you have the homogeneity of knowledge as the common distinguishing mark; at the bottom you have the heterogeneity of ignorance. At the top there is no trouble, because all know, know well and know together, and go like race horses. We never have had trouble with any top division. At the bottom it is not so much a question of finding out the sum of what they know, but of finding out the character of the ignorance with which you have to deal in each case. If you can diagnose that, then you can save the lowest division.

How interesting the lowest division is! Give me the head and tail of a class, not the middle. At the top are the fine-spirited fellows, who cannot be held in—who need the rein. In the lowest division they need the spur. That lowest division, though, whatever the subject is, contains those who are most evidently, painfully, woefully in need of preceptorial instruction. Yet it contains some of the most interesting and lovable fellows that ever came to college. That lowest division contains the mature fellow, with slow mind and poor preparation, who is trying hard. It contains the young fellow who has got too quickly into college and is only half ready for the burden. It also contains the really able fellow, who has had a good preparation, but does not mean to study. Those are the three kinds. I think there are no other kinds found in the lowest division.

Well then what? Take any of those class divisions, high or low. Assume that each division of twenty-five men is as homogeneous as it be made. Then take each division and break it into six clumps, clusters, little tiny groups or sets of four students; and you are able, if you put six preceptors at work simultaneously—each with one of the clumps of four—to treat preceptorially the entire class division at the same hour. It is also possible to shift any individual back and forth from one to another of these preceptorial groups, if occasion arises. What then? During the first two or three weeks of the term the individual students in the preceptorial groups which compose that lowest division—and there is the whole crucial test, of course—usually have to be taken tandem. They are all alike in being deficient, but unlike in the kind of ignorance they show. If you have an hour for four such men, give each one fifteen minutes the first day. Perhaps a week or two later you will be able to put two of them together, and the other two will still be taken separately.

Perhaps you will find one of your colleagues has a man he would like to trade with you. Perhaps you can make the shift. Of course, these six preceptors can easily meet, talk over their little blocks of four, and in the course of a month the blocks of four may be so redistributed as to assume something of homogeneity. If, for example, it be even the man who cannot tell the difference in algebra between multiplication and addition, as I fear some cannot, or if it be the person who cannot master the irregular verbs in Latin, as even the poet Heine admitted with tears he could not—no matter who it is, we have now got hold of the means of sorting him as nearly as possible into the exact place where he belongs. And, of course, as a month passes on, or two months pass on, more and more this group of men who are badly deficient, this little set of four, have been put together, perhaps shifted around from one group into another, till they have got into just the right place, and they are being treated by some one who is guide, philosopher, friend, critic, doctor, and politician all in one; and in a short time those fellows show the result.

Now, how do they show the result? I said this was not a system of class instruction by small divisions, and that it was not a system of coaching for examination. What is it? It is not in any sense coaching or tutoring on the course of study to which the preceptorial hour is related; but it is reinforcing the course of study by instruction, so to speak, “on the side.” Let us suppose a case of a student in Latin. He comes to reading his Livy. He has fallen into the Serbonian bog of trouble, namely, the subjunctive. I don’t care how lamentable his difficulty, his preceptor takes him and makes the difficulty as plain as he can make it talking straight from one to the other. He sets him something to write. He sets him to “making his Latines” as—who was it? the great old schoolmaster, Roger Ascham said, “making his Latines.” And so in a short time he is taken out of the bog, his feet are set on a rock, and a song of rejoicing is in his mouth. In other words, in the course in Livy the preceptorial hour is given to instruction of freshmen in the Latin language, according to the individual need of each one. The stuff that is used to teach him the language is the text of Livy, and his illustrations will be taken, his examples taken, the stuff out of which some English will be given for him to make into Latin, if you like, will be taken from Livy, and in that sense it is related directly to the course. And yet perhaps no two men, certainly no two blocks of students, have precisely the same area of instruction. The area of the preceptor’s effort is the varying area of each student’s special need.

Let us recapitulate for a moment. We divide the three hundred

into twelve homogeneous class divisions. We divide each class division into six preceptorial groups, according to the example I have given. Now, that is not the rule in all departments. In some departments we have not enough men to do that; but something of that sort is our aim, and to a very large degree we are realizing that aim.

How did we know the students were going to like it? We did not. When the first academic procession of the faculty took place, with the host of new preceptors added, the university turned out as though to see what sort of a new reinforcement we had secured for our intellectual football team. The curiosity with which our students watched the rejuvenated faculty was well worth looking at.

To go on with our theme: No preceptor marks his students on their preceptorial work. No student is bound to be there; but if he is not there, he will not be examined. What a combination of foreordination and election it is! If the preceptor cannot say that his preceptee—pardon the word “preceptee”—has tried to do satisfactory work during the term, the department is not likely to examine him. What a lot of trouble that saves! I have in mind, however, the first result, at the end of the first term when this plan was started last year. In one department, which enrolled seven hundred students, the total number of men who had to be excluded from examination, because they had not attended to the preceptorial work with sufficient fidelity and intelligence to satisfy the department, was only sixteen. We never had such a record in our history. Why? First, because the men found study interesting; second, because they liked the men who taught them; and, third, because they knew it was fair that the university should not waste its time on them if they did not respond.

Many interesting things have grown out of this. Students are wonderfully complex beings—frank, irreverent, loyal, careless, optimistic, adventurous, lovable—boys turning into men. They begin to establish their own traditions, what they call immemorial traditions, which are made very quickly in college life—a college generation being only four years, and the memory of a college generation being just four years long. What then? After a while the fellows get to thinking: “Well, what a really pleasant thing this is! We four are just a little club, with Professor So-and-so up in his room. If we want to smoke, we can do it.” Nothing is said about that—nothing said one way or the other. “We sit around the table. We go over questions of interest. One is set to criticizing the other, he to criticizing all of us.” What happens in the term? Perhaps somebody drops out of that group, perhaps drops out of college. For whatever reason, he has disappeared. A new one enters. He is

received with curious feelings. "What business has he to come into our group? This belongs to us. This is our privilege." I would not destroy that feeling in their minds for anything—the feeling that they have something that is their own, that they have got something worth while. That is a good thing. "And who is this man to come in?" is a very pardonable question for them to ask. How much better than if they were all scurrying to get out of the group as fast as possible. What wonderful fellows students are!

There are some tests we can mention as indicating the immediate effect of the preceptorial teaching in its first year in Princeton. One is the test of the use of books in the university library. If there is anything obvious to be said about the intellectual condition of our American students today, it is that there is a sense in which they are illiterate. Splendid fellows, but are they reading men? A man that does not like to read ought not to be called a student. How easy to read the newspapers, to read the athletic news, sometimes magazine articles, occasionally a book—a novel. But is it true that this generation is brought up to read good literature? I am not a pessimist—far from it. Yet when I see the statistics collected in various colleges showing the abysmal ignorance that exists regarding the greatest book of our literature, the English Bible, somehow I feel that we have been losing good literature in our homes, in our intercourse, in our colleges, in all our life. Now, one of the charming and delightful sides of this preceptorial question is the strong emphasis we lay on reading, particularly in the upper years, and to some extent in the lower years. Perhaps we are giving them too much to read; I fear we are. In our desire to make things work, we are crowding them a little. The university library proceeded to get plenty of sets of books, so that our students should not be compelled to spend their money too freely on the books that were set alongside of their courses. It kept account of the books that were used. The average use of the university library on the part of undergraduates the first term the preceptorial system went into effect increased heavily. I think we can say the books that were taken out in abundance were books of history, books of philosophy, books of literature, books of science—books that ought to be the natural reading of a man who calls himself a student.

A second, and even a more subtle, test is the changing character of conversation on the campus, at the so-called "eating clubs"—what a dreadful name for a club! Things intellectual are now in good form—if spoken of without affectation. I could tell stories of students whom I know well that would come only too close home. Some of them had got

in the way of thinking that it was not the thing, you know, to be studying too much; the thing was to enjoy your good comradeship; to study some, as much as might become a gentleman—no more; but not to throw yourself heart and soul into the best knowledge, not to make the acquaintance of the great masters of thought and fancy, not to open the mind, but to grow up, as one very wise English critic said, with “undeveloped mind,” with boys’ minds in men’s bodies. That is changing. The talk is more and more of things intellectual. Even tangents and cosines sometimes fly around the campus, I don’t mean for a moment to say that they won’t talk a lot of other things; far from it. I do mean to say that there is some talk of these things daily at the table, in the walking by twos and threes, in animated informal discussion—just the thing we want. And out of that is coming—what? I fully believe there is coming the recovery of the lost art of conversation.

Then a third thing, and I have done. Perhaps the most visibly notable thing is the effect on the university when evening comes. A great number of lights in the rooms; the comparative absence of strolling, roaming crowds; the greater quietude; the general air. What shall I say? Is it the atmosphere of study that is brooding and settling over the old halls in the evening? I think it is.

Now, ladies and gentlemen, as far as a man can try who believes in a thing so much that he is in danger of speaking as an advocate rather than as a judge, I have tried to state fairly, if I could, the results of our first year. It has succeeded beyond what we expected. It has not fully succeeded yet. Many difficulties arise from the first application that have still to be worked out. But we are so encouraged as to believe that we are recovering, at least for Princeton, the lost priceless benefit of the small college in the larger university. If so, we somehow feel that we are doing the rank and file of our students a greater service than by any other device we can think of to put in operation—any device that is in any way within our reach.